COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES
237 HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING ANNEX 2
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

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# REPORT ON THE ESTONIAN REFERENDUM AND LATVIAN PUBLIC OPINION POLL ON INDEPENDENCE

## MARCH 3, 1991

## Tallinn and Iegava District, Estonia
## Riga, Latvia

**Prepared by the Staff**
**of the**
**U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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## SUMMARY

On March 3, 1991, in votes observed by hundreds of reporters and international observers -- including representatives of the Helsinki Commission, which had been asked by Baltic leaders to send observers -- the people of Estonia and Latvia expressed their preference on the political future of their respective countries by answering "yes" or "no" to questions designed to indicate the strength of popular support for full independence. The result was a resounding success for pro-independence movements. The biggest surprise, given the large proportion of non-Balts in Estonia and Latvia (38 percent and 48 percent of the population, respectively), was that about half of the non-Baltic population voted in favor of independence. Both in Estonia and Latvia, international observers pronounced themselves satisfied with the manner in which the voting was conducted, reporting either no or few and insignificant irregularities.

## BACKGROUND

The March 3 votes in Estonia and Latvia followed a similar exercise in Lithuania on February 9, which was held to counter the two-track Kremlin assault on the Baltic independence drive by: 1) calling for a March 17 USSR-wide referendum on keeping the union together, after it became clear that Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and most Soviet republic legislatures would not sign Mikhail Gorbachev's draft union treaty; and 2) insisting that the Baltic independence movement be "constitutional," i.e., conform with the 1990 Soviet law on secession, which requires at least two approving referendum votes by the population of the republic in question.

The Baltic States had long rebuffed Moscow's demands to hold a referendum, but after the bloodshed in January in Lithuania and Latvia, and pressed by the center to comply with the law on the March 17 referendum, Lithuania organized its February 9 display of public backing for the leadership's pro-independence policy. In that vote 85 percent of the population went to the polls, and an impressive 90.5 percent of the voters cast their ballot for independence. The demographics in Estonia and Latvia made the outcome less predictable and more risky than in Lithuania (where only 20 percent of the population is non-Lithuanian), but legislators in Tallinn and Riga eventually opted as well for a preemptive move to counter anticipated action by Moscow after March 17 to present the Baltic States, the Soviet republics and the world with a *fait accompli* ostensibly backed by the democratically-expressed "will of the people." However, in order to avoid even the appearance of compliance with the secession law, Latvia -- like Lithuania -- called its vote a "public opinion poll"; the Estonian vote was officially called a referendum, which was supposed to serve as an indicator of public opinion.

## THE QUESTION AND PROCEDURES

Estonia. The question on the ballot (printed in Estonia and Russian) read: "Do you want the restoration of the state sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Estonia?" The regulations governing the voting were basically the same as for the 1990 Supreme Soviet election, with polling places distributed throughout the 15 rural districts and six cities represented in the Estonian Supreme Soviet. Except for the four Soviet military deputies in Estonia's parliament, military personnel could not vote, since participation was contingent on holding a valid permanent [Soviet] residence permit. Originally, prisoners were also denied voting rights, but this prohibition was later dropped. Persons unable to vote on March 3 could, with proper credentials, vote up to three days prior to referendum day. Those eligible could also vote in Sweden or Denmark.

Latvia. The question (written in Latvian and Russian on the ballot) read: "Do you support the democratic and independent statehood of the Republic of Latvia?" Voters had to be at least 18 years old, have a Soviet internal passport and be permanently registered in Latvia. Those who could not vote in their assigned districts on March 3 could do so in preliminary voting that began on February 24. Persons without internal passports, including active members of the Soviet Armed Forces, could not vote. Fifty percent of eligible voters in Latvia had to take part for the vote to be valid; approximately 1.9 million voters were eligible to cast their ballots in 1,400 voting districts.

## PARTICIPANTS AND BOYCOTTERS

Estonia. All the major political parties in Estonia supported the referendum, with the exception of the Estonian National Independence Party. The pro-Moscow "InterMovement" also resisted the referendum, but in the end attempted to rally voters to vote "no."

Latvia. The majority Popular Front faction of the parliament, naturally, favored the advisory vote but the minority ("Equal Rights") faction opposed it, urging voters to cross out both "yes" and "no." The pro-Moscow Latvian Communist Party called on people to vote against independence. The Republican Party, a radical faction of the Latvian Citizens' Congress, opposed the vote and boycotted it, since Latvia is still occupied by Soviet troops.

## COMPLAINTS

Both in Estonia and Latvia, pro-independence deputies claimed that anti-independence forces had used scare tactics, such as stuffing mail boxes with anonymous fliers depicting the horrors that would follow independence; specifically, the mass deportation of non-Balts or people who had come to Estonia and Latvia since 1940. In

Latvia, the "Equal Rights" faction objected to the wording of the question, charged before the vote that irregularities had occurred, and argued that monitoring, even with the aid of international observers, could not avert the chicanery they believed would almost certainly take place.

## OBSERVERS

Fearing violence or irregularities -- especially after the bloodshed in Lithuania and Latvia in January 1991 -- and wanting the imprimatur of world public opinion for the results, the Estonian and Latvian parliaments and governments invited international observers to attend the March 3 votes. The Central Electoral Committees in Tallinn and Riga accredited over 140 observers in Estonia and over 120 in Latvia, giving them access to polling stations and transportation throughout their countries, as well as the right to observe all aspects of the voting, including the opening and sealing of ballot boxes and ballot counting.

## IRREGULARITIES, VIOLATIONS, VOTING AND COUNTING

Estonia. In Estonia no irregularities were reported by observers to Helsinki Commission staff, and none were reported subsequently. But a Norwegian observer noted that in the Russian-speaking Narva area, she saw citizens voting for other family members, and more than one person at a time in a voting booth, a practice observed by Helsinki Commission staff during previous elections.

Though military personnel could not vote, a Tallinn newspaper reported that some commanders organized elections on the Friday before polling day. Soldiers in the three ethnic Russian northeast districts were allowed to participate by decision of the local city councils.

Two Georgian observers joined Helsinki Commission staff in visiting eight polling places in the Iegava district in east-central Estonia. Everything was businesslike, voters said they had received sufficient information on the issues, and there was no "electioneering" near the polling places.

Latvia. Latvian deputies reported cases of "dead souls" in Riga and other inaccuracies in the voter lists, as well as cases of military personnel illegally obtaining internal passports and attempting to vote. But international observers at press conferences gave the proceedings their seal of approval, stating that they had witnessed no irregularities. Few untoward incidents were reported.

Commission staff often saw more than one person in a voting booth, but it was clear they were members of the same family. Generally, the voting appeared to be orderly and Commission staff observed the vote count in a district of Riga inhabited by many army

officers. There, in the presence of an eagle-eyed Latvian deputy, the count was checked many times and all present eventually agreed on the results, which, surprisingly, favored independence. Election commissions were staffed by Latvians and Russians representing various political organizations, and there were local observers present during the voting and counting. Following the vote, Sergey Dimanis, the head of the minority faction in the Latvian parliament, told Commission staff that he accepted the results.

**RESULTS**

Estonia. Of the 83 percent of eligible voters who participated, 78.6 percent voted "yes" to independence, about 20 percent voted against, and a handful were disqualified. The overwhelming majority of Estonians from the rural areas (93 percent) strongly endorsed independence. The more ethnically diverse urban areas provided a lower, but still significant "yes" vote (65 percent). The results indicated about half the Russians in Estonia voted for independence. In the three overwhelmingly Russian-speaking northeast districts of Estonia, voters favored a locally initiated proposition asking if they wanted "a sovereign Estonia to remain in the USSR."

Latvia. Of the 88 percent of the eligible voters who participated, 73.7 percent voted "yes" while 24.7 percent voted "no." Turnout was highest in heavily Latvian rural regions, where over 93 percent of the population participated, of whom 86 percent voted "yes" and 13 percent voted "no." In Riga, which is about 36 percent Latvian, close to 85 percent of voters took part; close to 61 percent voted "yes," while some 37 percent voted "no."

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MARCH 3 VOTES IN ESTONIA AND LATVIA**

President Gorbachev had officially decreed the February 9 Lithuanian public opinion poll illegal and invalid, saying that he would not be bound by the results, but he apparently made no public pronouncements on the March 3 vote in Estonia and Latvia. While Baltic leaders do not claim that the voting in their respective states has binding legal consequences, spokesmen for different political perspectives offer varying, and often conflicting, assessments of the implications of these expressions of public opinion on Baltic independence.

The most extreme view was probably represented by Alfreds Rubiks, head of the pro-Moscow Latvian Communist Party, who argued that a "yes" vote exceeding 55 percent would constitute "proof" of fraud. But Rubiks' position (and that of his like-minded colleagues elsewhere) seems much weaker in the aftermath of the balloting, given the unexpectedly high backing among Russians for Latvian independence. In fact, Commission staff observed the vote count which favored independence in the very district of Riga which had elected Rubiks to Latvia's parliament.

Many commentators saw the vote as symbolically significant and hence politically

meaningful. The outcome of the Estonian and Latvian votes following Lithuania's pro-independence poll, and the evidence of widespread support among their populations for independence, help to consolidate a unified Baltic stance vis-a-vis the Kremlin. Anatoly Gorbunovs, chairman of the Latvian parliament, told reporters that the pro-independence results supply an additional argument for Baltic leaders to use with Mikhail Gorbachev, who has often claimed that only small numbers of nationalist and separatist "hotheads" actually want Baltic independence. Now it will be more difficult for Gorbachev and others to minimize the size and influence of the pro-independence movement or to try to play off Lithuania against Latvia and Estonia. Equally important, the showing of support for independence by almost half of the non-Baltic population in Estonia and Latvia greatly strengthens the independence drive and undercuts efforts to portray communal friction and anti-independence sentiment in the Baltic states as primarily ethnic, as opposed to political, in origin.

One important implication of the polling outcome is that the use of violence as a tool in the political struggle over Baltic independence has been discredited. Many felt that the killings of unarmed civilians in Lithuania and Latvia by Soviet troops in January 1991 had influenced non-Baltic people in favor of independence, a view that was shared by Sergey Dimanis, head of the "Equal Rights" faction of the Latvian parliament. If the forces in charge of the Internal Affairs Ministry, the KGB and Army troops take seriously this interpretation, it might help prevent a recurrence of the bloodshed that shocked the world in January.

While Baltic leaders were understandably pleased with the outcome of the voting, it nevertheless appears that approximately half of the non-Baltic population in Estonia and Latvia remains opposed to independence. Baltic legislatures and governments will have to consider the views of this sector of the population, both as a variable in their ongoing discussions with Gorbachev and in terms of domestic legislative initiatives. One of their greatest challenges will lie in drafting citizenship legislation which adequately addresses this factor. Conceivably, as some Baltic political activists have conjectured, the support for Baltic independence shown by non-Balts could result in a law on citizenship that would be broad-based enough to help win over some of today's opponents of Baltic independence.

Finally, all Baltic leaders know that while their cause has been bolstered by the results of the voting, this is no guarantee of success because the politically powerful individuals and institutions in the Soviet Union which remain adamantly opposed to Baltic independence retain enough instruments of control and coercion to crush the movement by force. Nevertheless, the soundings of public opinion that have now occurred in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia provide grounds for optimism. Pro-independence sentiment has proved stronger than anticipated, and this will clearly strengthen the position of the Baltic leaders not only at home but also with Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet population, and abroad.